Eugene Carson Blake, the Pastor

by John M. Buchanan

LAST APRIL I WAS IN ONE OF THE BUILDINGS which flank the street just outside the Plaza of St. Peter, in Rome, on the third floor, in the offices of the Pontifical Secretariat for Christian Unity. My mind and emotions were alternating between "What in the world am I doing here?" and "I wish my father and mother could see me now!" and a fairly moving sense of the historicity of the whole experience. What I was doing there was representing the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which had elected me its moderator, paying an ecumenical visit to the Vatican. Our party consisted of my wife, Sue, Eugene Turner from the Office of the General Assembly, our chief ecumenical officer, Duncan Hanson, our Coordinator for Mission in Europe, Debbie Vial from our Peacemaking office, and myself. The next day we would be special guests at a papal audience and did, in fact, bring the greetings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to Pope John Paul II. This day we were guests of the Pontifical Secretariat for Christian Unity and we were invited to exchange ideas with the director, Cardinal Cassidy, the vice director, Monsignor DuPray, and the secretary, Father John Radono, an American.

As we were ushered doing the hallway to the conference room past a row of photographs of important ecumenical moments at the Vatican, John Radono pointed to one of the pictures and said, "That's one of our favorites." Of course. There he was, Geneva gown and tabs, walking in a procession with Pope Paul VI, flashing that winsome and familiar smile, the stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church, Eugene Carson Blake.

I never met Eugene Carson Blake. In fact I somehow managed to be ordained without really understanding what I had just become part of and didn't know we had a stated clerk, or a General Assembly for that matter. But it wasn't long, the time being the early sixties, until I became deeply and proudly aware of my church. And it was Blake who did it. I often reflect on the fact that I was never more in love with my church than I was in the days when Presbyterians were stepping up and assuming leadership in the civil rights movement. It was when I became a Presbyterian truly, by choice and conviction. Although I had been born, baptized, confirmed, and now ordained one, I truly became a Presbyterian when my church started to take strong public stands for racial justice. And I was never more proud than I was on the day I saw the newspaper picture of a Presbyterian minister in clerical collar and straw hat being arrested at an amusement park outside Baltimore.

My people were not amused. My Republican father was appalled and held me per-

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sonally accountable. Blake's arrest was a defining moment: it gave me—and others—the opportunity to talk about what it meant to be publicly faithful to Jesus Christ, and paying the price of faithfulness, and how Presbyterians have always shown up in public when issues of justice and morality were being discussed and confronted.

I

I thought Blake was God—or at least a very close colleague. If we had a pope or presiding bishop, he was it for me. I felt the same way about his successors. I was in awe of William P. Thompson, and still am; saw him on an elevator in Philadelphia one time in 1976 and was so nervous I could barely speak. And as I came to know and appreciate Jim Andrews, I lost a little of the nervousness and began to see how critical this office is for us and to be grateful for the kind of dedication, integrity, and leadership offered by him, Bill Thompson, and now Clifton Kirkpatrick. One of my most cherished memories will be presiding as moderator over the election of a new clerk and watching and occasionally being present as Cliff learned the job and claimed and started to do it in the distinguished manner of his predecessors, but with his own winsomely gentle strength.

Eugene Carson Blake was clearly the right leader at the right time for the Presbyterian Church and although I am not neutral on the subject, part of his preparation and part of the extraordinary gifts he brought to the job came from his extensive experience as pastor. A friend of mine, Kenneth Smith, president of Chicago Theological Seminary, tells about being invited to leave his pastorate and become a seminary president. He went to talk to one of his close friends, Hannah Gray, who was the president and chancellor of the University of Chicago. He told Dr. Gray that he was just a pastor and didn't know how to run a seminary and she said, "Ken, if you can run a congregation, you can run anything." I've come to a similar conclusion. If you can lead a vigorous, lively, and complex church, you can lead anything.

Blake's background prepared him uniquely for pastoral ministry. His biographer, R. Douglas Brackenridge, warns, "Biographers foolish enough to claim that they have unlocked the door of human personality and motivation are, unfortunately, also often foolish enough to believe that what they write down is always correct."[1] I am indebted to Professor Brackenridge for most of what I learned about Blake, in his fine biography, *Prophet With Portfolio*, and also his extensive interview notes which are on file with the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia.

Blake was born in 1906 into an intentionally Christian home. His parents belonged to the West Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, and their Presbyterianism was pietistic and fundamentalist. Gene Blake was energetic and worked hard at whatever he did, including academics and athletics. He was blessed to have two parents who loved him and who imparted, along with their piety and fundamentalism, a gracious openness to other people, particularly their Jewish neighbors. His people were people of some means. His father, O. P. Blake, was a steel salesman and did well enough to be a dollar-a-year man for the government during the First World War. I discovered that Blake had a Chicago connection when his father worked at Inland Steel headquarters in Chicago, 1919–21. His family lived in Winnetka and Blake attended what was and still is one of the best and most creative public secondary schools in the country, New Trier High School.

Blake finished secondary school at Lawrenceville and followed his brother Howard to Princeton University where he played varsity football, starting at guard as a senior. He worked hard and earned honorable mention on several All East teams in a day when Ivy League football was among the best in the land. All his life Blake was relentlessly honest about his own abilities and committed to getting the best of himself. At Princeton he was a good student, gradu-

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ating *cum laude*, but did not earn a Phi Beta Kappa key, which his brother Howard had. The football experience was hard work as anyone who has ever competed at a varsity level knows. He said of himself: "I've never been an instant success anywhere, but I am competitive and persistent"—in my estimate two qualities more important in the long run than instant success.[2]

Princeton broadened Blake and opened up new intellectual and spiritual vistas. He horrified his parents by announcing in 1928 that he was voting for Al Smith. Theodore Meyer Greene, a young assistant professor of philosophy, inspired Blake to study art, art criticism, and esthetics. And it was at Princeton that he first encountered a mind and spirit which would play a major role in his later formation, Reinhold Niebuhr, a chapel preacher. Blake was caught up in the early stages of Frank Buchman's Moral Rearmament, became disenchanted, and made a major decision—namely that his religious energy would be invested in the church. He said, "From then on I decided to be an organization man—that is to work through the regular machinery of the organized church. I recognized the importance of voluntary groups but decided to concentrate on supporting and changing existing ecclesiastical structures."[3]

His personal spiritual journey came to a crossroads at a Christian conference at Northfield and he resolved to trust God and not allow intellectual questions, which continued all his life, to interfere with that trust. After graduating from Princeton he accepted a three year appointment to teach at Forman College in Lahore, India—now Pakistan. He learned about Christian missionary activity—its heroic faithfulness, but also its occasional negative impact, its cultural and ideological captivity, and occasional imperialism.

His three-year term was cut short by love, as he returned to the United States to marry Valina. Then came a year at New College, Edinburgh and a growing sense of call of ministry. It was an interesting time. Princeton was embroiled in the fundamentalist-modernist struggle. New College taught Blake that warm-hearted Evangelicalism could combine with the historical/critical approach to the Bible. His fundamentalism evolved into a kind of conservative orthodoxy theologically and biblically, with an openness to the world and a commitment to the gospel's engagement with the culture. After a year at New College, Blake returned to Princeton, entered seminary, and graduated in 1932, unsatisfied with either liberalism or fundamentalism.

Ordained as an "evangelist," his first call was at the Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas in Manhattan, one of a consistory of six Reformed churches, the oldest Protestant church in America with a continuous existence. The Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas was located at Fifth Avenue and Forty-eighth Street in 1628, on the site of what is now Rockefeller Center. Blake was fortunate to work with a distinguished pastor, Dr. Malcolm James MacLeod, who taught young Blake how to do it—how to preach. Besides insisting that Blake write a complete manuscript, MacLeod himself was a good preacher and Blake learned by listening (which, parenthetically, I have concluded is the only way anyone learns to preach). MacLeod taught him how to be a counselor—a listener—long before anyone was talking about pastoral theology as an academic discipline. MacLeod put Blake to work with young people, a theme that emerges in each of Blake's pastorates. And he issued classic advice which Blake appropriated at every step of his career: "Be able to call on some of the best homes on Fifth Avenue and also to walk up a five floor tenement and always to conduct yourself as a minister of Christ."

It was the Great Depression and Blake saw it first hand: people coming to St. Nicholas' for food; shops and stores closing; bread lines; quiet desperation. And he learned the important lesson that poverty is demeaning, complex, and dehumanizing. It was a theme that would emerge later. Brackenridge says, "Blake realized that the problems of poverty were more complex than hot lunch programs. The experiences of the Great Depression permanently affected Blake and needs

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of poor people and efforts to overcome poverty would subsequently always be an important part of his professional and personal life."

In 1935 the young assistant pastor was called as senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Albany, a congregation of 1200 members, and again he encountered a distinguished mentor, his predecessor, William Herman Hopkins. Hopkins broke all the rules—at least as we understood them. He sat in the first pew every Sunday as Blake preached. That doesn't often work very well but Blake made it work, visited Hopkins regularly, consulted, asked his advice, and the two became good friends. When I read that I reflected on how difficult we seem to have made that situation, with our expectations that our predecessor will either die immediately or go far away, which for many is a kind of dying, instead of the positive, assertive claiming of the predecessor as advisor, consultant, and friend in ministry.

Blake the pastor began to emerge distinctly in Albany. He would later say that he never thought of himself as a good pastor, that he couldn't focus on people's personal problems because he was always thinking of something else. But he made 500 calls his first year in Albany, something I've never done, and on Fridays he and Valina were at home from 4 to 6 for visitors from the congregation.

He also started to preach prophetically, addressing issues of local and national social and political relevance. This preacher knows from sometimes painful experience that you cannot preach prophetically and keep your job, unless you are also a pretty good pastor. Preachers who style themselves as contemporary Amoses often forget that Amos didn't have a congregation to tend to and a session to moderate. In his first year at Albany, on the Sunday before election day, Blake attacked local political corruption and told his congregation that they were responsible for it by condoning or ignoring it. Some were not happy.

He also ended the old system of pew rentals in opposition to his board of trustees, who were concerned that there was no other way to raise money to pay the church's bills. Blake listened to their concern, then simply asked every family to donate the exact amount of money they had been charged for their own pew, and met with a near unanimous response. I'm sensitive to this issue because Fourth Presbyterian Church, long after every other church discontinued the practice, was still charging pew rent, reserving pews for renters and making visitors wait outside until five minutes before the service in 1960. My predecessor, Elam Davies, ended the practice, contrary to the wishes of the trustees, with much the same result. Again my sense is that prophetic leadership, as well as prophetic preaching, is much more possible and effective when the one involved is a trusted pastor.

Blake's interest in youth expressed itself again creatively at free-wheeling Sunday night "chats" with young people which were unusual at the time and highly popular. The president of Williams College heard Blake preach, observed his work with young people, and invited him to teach a course in ethics and theology at the college, which Blake did for three years. That experience, too, I believe, shaped the pastoral focus of his ministry for the rest of his life.

Also at Williams, looking for a suitable text to use in a course on Ethics and Theology, Blake became reacquainted with the theologian whom he had heard preach at the Princeton University Chapel years before, Reinhold Niebuhr. Blake chose Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, outlined the book paragraph by paragraph for his classroom lectures, and in the process became a Niebuhrian. I did not know that about Blake and I'm glad I now do. It was Niebuhr, I assume, who gave Blake the deep and defining conviction that the gospel has and must always have, political, social, economic relevance.

Blake liked Niebuhr's critique of both liberalism and fundamentalism and his embrace of orthodox Christian doctrine, including the authority of scripture, without embracing fundamentalism. Once and for

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all Blake moved away from the conservative, fundamentalist beliefs of his own childhood and youth. He said, "I woke one morning and discovered that the front had moved."[4]

Niebuhr's brilliant explanation of sin as pride produced in Blake a balanced sense of his own self in situations and positions which would be increasingly public and therefore susceptible to an inflated sense of self-importance. Blake wrote, "Reinhold Niebuhr's oft reiterated thesis that a man who is nearest to God is in the greatest danger of the greatest sin, is an almost perfect aid to the preacher who is early lost in admiration for his own theology, politics, and sermons. Next to a good sense of humor and prayer, a good dose of Niebuhr is the best thing I know to alleviate a preacher's swollen self-esteem."[5]

It was Niebuhr, Brackenridge suggests, who kept Blake from becoming a career chaplain to the wealthy. "By circumstance, Eugene Carson Blake could easily have been nothing more than a [pastor] to the rich and to the comfortable." He came from a comfortable home, attending an elite private school and then Princeton at a time when Princeton was a very different school in terms of economic and racial diversity than it is today. His three churches were large and wealthy and could have nurtured in him an understandable insularity and elitism. Something like the reverse happened because of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Holy Spirit.

Blake was sensitive to labor issues, again, at a time when that was not an easy position for ministers to assume. He backed up his pulpit pronouncements with visible volunteer work in the community. He paid his dues in terms of Community Chest and service clubs—and although his fellow Rotarians or Kiwanians probably did not agree with his convictions, they respected the devoted pastor and committed citizen and so gave him a hearing.

First Church Albany grew under Blake's leadership and in 1940 he accepted the call of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, one of the outstanding congregations in the Presbyterian Church. Once again Blake followed a distinguished ministry. Robert Freeman was the Pasadena pastor for 33 years, and once again Blake avoided the professional pitfalls that today cause many to conclude that it cannot be done and should not be tried by anyone of sound mind.

II

The Pasadena Church was large, 3,500 members with what at the time was a huge budget, $150,000, wonderful buildings, a radio station and summer camp, a reputation for "progressive orthodoxy," and also some extremely wealthy and extremely conservative members. At Pasadena, Blake came of age as a preacher, scholar, and administrator and began to become more involved in the affairs of the Presbytery of Los Angeles, which turned to him more and more for leadership. He was on the Judicial Commission of the presbytery, which investigated and rebuked a pastor for performing the wedding of Lana Turner and millionaire sportsman Henry J. Topping, without waiting the prescribed one year after divorce as then required by Presbyterian law. Pasadena Presbyterian Church began to grow immediately, from 3,500 to 4,500, third largest in the Presbyterian Church, with new buildings, programs, and an unheard of six ministers on the staff. The *Presbyterian Tribune* gave Pasadena its number one rating on the basis of Sunday school, membership, ratio of benevolences, and total giving.

And once again, although he never though of himself as a pastor, Blake clearly was a great one. Ministers of large congregations have to learn a different way of being pastors and must let go of old, deeply instilled patterns and expectations. Blake did it by clearly communicating his accessibility and then backing it up by being accessible. He wrote in the parish newsletter:

> I am available to all of you, day or night, in emergency. As a general rule, it is necessary for me to keep my morning clear for writing sermons, speeches, articles and the like, and for reading. But by appointment, I am always glad to see as many members of the church who want to see me, if for no other reason than that they

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would like to become acquainted. I, too, want to become acquainted. You do me and the church a disservice if you let it be agreed among you that I am too busy to be seen.[7]

If we ever created a manual on how to be the pastor of a big Presbyterian church, that paragraph should be in it for all to heed.

Blake called in the hospitals, visited shut-ins, visited personally with every elder nominee, and once again paid attention to young people. I know now how difficult that was, how easy to relegate it to other staff in the name of busyness or priorities. Blake went to the church's summer camp, played baseball, swam. When some of his young people sewed lace on his swimming trunks, Blake wore them. He visited the children in the church school regularly and with his staff established a personal relationship of genuine friendship which created a climate of mutuality and trust in which high expectations can be maintained and honored.

His social concerns began to shape the big Pasadena Church. He started a club for World War II servicemen which grew into a dormitory for 300 every weekend. The Women's Society, a traditional Bible study group, took on responsibility for feeding migrant farm workers, and Blake expanded the horizons of the church's radio station to include classical music and local political issues as well as church programs.

I noted how thoroughly Blake did his homework. His style might not be politically correct in today's environment when leadership often means taking a back seat, keeping your mouth shut, and enabling the laity to be responsible. Blake planned every meeting he attended, prepared the agenda, knew what he wanted to see happen, arranged for the members he wanted to be appointed and the officers he wanted to be elected.

III

And he kept paying attention to his preaching, which continued to address social concerns—increasingly race—and a new ideology which disturbed him deeply, the identification of nationalism and patriotism with the gospel, particularly as that ideology was espoused in the zealous anti-communism of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Blake's critique of the overheated patriotism which came to be known as "McCarthyism" was grounded in sound, biblical Reformed preaching. Our ultimate allegiance is to God, not human institutions, particularly governments. He condemned loyalty oaths. Those positions, so important in our tradition, often sound suspect if not subversive to the super-patriot of the right—or the left.

When I visited Cuba last year I spoke with Presbyterian pastors and asked if they had encountered government opposition or persecution. One of them, a leader in Cuba, told me he had been detained for questioning recently. "There is a person from the government Ministry of Religion in my sanctuary every Sunday," he said, "with a tape recorder to record everything I say. I was brought in for questioning because on Reformation Sunday I said that we Calvinists believe our allegiance is ultimately to our Lord and his Kingdom and not to any human institution, or government. My government wanted to know what I meant by that," he explained.

Blake was criticized when he took on local real estate interests which were offering substandard and racially segregated housing; some members walked out during his sermon. But he was a pastor. He backed his sermon, not only with scripture and tradition but also a common humanity and affection for his people which they knew and felt. Blake did not condemn the sinful perpetrators of injustice and oppression but swept everyone, including himself, into the picture. What a difference that makes—instead of being singled out for condemnation, to be invited into a community which is considering a mutual problem.

Blake stayed with the Bible. When asked about his sermon preparation he said it was "steel, a flint and a spark. The steel of the word strikes the flint of human need and the spark is the idea that flies." At the center of his preaching and his pastoral practice was the lordship of Jesus Christ. He never lost the

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evangelical focus of his childhood. Christian faith was not merely intellectual assent to certain propositions or creeds, but a personal commitment to and relationship with Jesus Christ. Blake wrote, "The primary task of the church is to bring people to God in Jesus Christ."[8]

An interesting encounter with the president of Fuller Seminary, John Ockenja, a Presbyterian pastor from Pittsburgh, which began with Blake opposing Ockenja's laboring within the boundaries of Los Angeles Presbytery and the presbytery refusing to ordain Fuller graduates, ended with Blake and Ockenja meeting together and developing a respectful friendship, and not long after, Fuller was using the Pasadena Presbyterian Church's sanctuary and classrooms for seminary activities. Blake played an increasingly important role in denominational affairs in those days including giving pivotal leadership to the development and publication of the Faith and Life Curriculum, so far as I know the first and last denominational curriculum to be widely—almost universally—applauded and, more importantly, purchased by Presbyterian churches.

At the age of 45, Blake was at the top of his career as a pastor. He could, of course, have stayed in Pasadena and deepened and broadened his extraordinary ministry. He could have moved to another large congregation. In his years of pastoral ministry he expressed, I believe, the highest and best of the Reformed tradition's model of ministry: a careful scholar, devout student of the Bible, passionate and prophetic preacher, and, in spite of the fact that he never thought of himself in this way, a caring and accessible pastor. He wrote, uncharacteristically reflectively:

> I find myself standing a little beyond the middle of life. I stand in the place of the heat of the day when often the defeats of youth and the approaching twilight of age make men lose their sense of direction in life and the feeling of its importance and begin to look for the easy adjustment to the flux of things. Yet I stand where perhaps best of all one can be objective about the great hopes of youth and the weariness of age. Between beginnings and ends, birth and death.[9]

And so when the call came to serve the Presbyterian Church as its stated clerk, Eugene Carson Blake answered the call and served the church and led the church through what turned out to be one of the most critical and tumultuous times in its history. The purview of my assignment could end here, except for the fact that Blake continued to be a pastor in a vastly larger arena, both as stated clerk and finally as general secretary of the World Council of Churches. In fact, Blake viewed the office of stated clerk as a means of expanding his pastoral ministry. He continued to preach prophetically—speaking to and for the denomination. Preachers know that part of a prophetic ministry is not simply thundering away at the church. Plenty do it. It's not difficult to do. It can make the preacher feel righteous. It rarely does much beyond angering the listeners. Part of being prophetic is finding the words that the church, at its best, wants to say, to preach for the church in the world. Blake did it brilliantly. He also had a Reformed sense of the pastor's role to live in and interface with the world for the church. That, too, he did instinctively.

In both the Office of the General Assembly and the offices of the World Council of Churches, Eugene Carson Blake exhibited the pastoral instinct which characterized his ministry in the three parishes he served. He paid attention to people. He relied, always, on his predecessors, turning potential rivals and adversaries into friends, colleagues, supporters, and he managed to avoid personally insulting his opponents even in the midst of deep disagreement and strenuous debate.

In conclusion, I should like to advance the following gleanings from Blake's pastoral ministry, areas where he contributed substantially to the life of our church and our role as ministers and servants, as topics for further exploration and discussion.

1. His commitment to the Presbyterian Church as the means to express his faith in Jesus Christ and sense of call to ministry. During his days at Princeton University, Blake became involved in the First Century

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Christian Fellowship, a very popular student movement conceived by Frank Buchman, which would become Moral Rearmament. The fellowship organized "house parties," small groups for Bible study, confession and testimony, mutual encouragement, and seeking "guidance" from the Holy Spirit. Blake liked the non-sectarian, non-denominational approach of the organization and participated regularly in house parties. His disenchantment began when it seemed Frank Buchman's opinions and goals regularly coincided with the Holy Spirit's guidance. That disenchantment, of course, is related to one of the great strengths of our church: its suspicion of unchecked political power and its reliance on the community, the governing bodies of the church, to be a balance to individual power and authority, and the most appropriate arena to make faithful decisions. And so Blake became a self-styled "organization man, working in and through the church."

Blake's investment of his life in the Presbyterian Church as a pastor is worth considering. In a time characterized by what someone recently called institutionalized anti-institutionalism, and when the demise of the denomination as we know it is simply and easily assumed in many quarters, and when the quality, and character, not to mention the length, of our meetings is routinely lamented by many who refuse to be accountably involved in the life of the body, Blake's witness is clear. If this thing goes down, it may well be the Holy Spirit working in us to create a new church for a new day. It may also be that we adopted the anti-institutionalized individualism of the late twentieth century, gave up on the old one, and decided to stay home.

2. Blake's ministry began and proceeded through a time of enormous social and cultural change. Shortly after his ordination in 1932, a retired minister said to him, "I'm glad it's you who is beginning your ministry. Things are changing so much I couldn't face being a pastor now."[10] Blake lived through the Great Depression, World War II, post-war economic and demographic change, McCarthyism, Korea, civil rights and Vietnam. We live in a time characterized by the most rapid social and cultural change in the history of humankind. Ten-year-old global maps are hopelessly out of date. The Soviet Union is gone. Russian troops serve under American commanders in Bosnia. The Pope was in Cuba celebrating Mass and Fidel Castro was in the congregation. Twenty-five percent of the words we routinely use did not exist twenty-five years ago. A "crack salesman" used to be a very effective sales representative for IBM. Futurist Leonard Sweet calls it a "Phase Transition," a major shifting of the cultural tectonic plates with a greater potential impact than the invention of the printing press and moveable type. The question, of course, is how to be a faithful church of Jesus Christ in the brand new world we are facing, and how to induce our lively tradition to respond creatively to the new world without losing its integrity.

Blake was clear that his faith centered in his trust in Jesus Christ and his commitment to the basic mission of the church as bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ and bringing people to God in Christ. And then he trusted the church, his own Presbyterian Church, as the best vehicle for his vocation in all the changes ahead.

3. Blake learned what he needed to know as a pastor in three churches that challenged him to grow, and in each case part of his growth came as a result of an intentional relationship with a strong predecessor. In fact, that pattern repeated itself when Blake succeeded W. A. Visser 't Hooft, an accomplished linguist and distinguished scholar who had helped to found the World Council of Churches in 1948. Blake avoided the twin mistakes of trying to emulate his predecessor or contradicting him by seeking Visser 't Hooft's advice and counsel, giving him an office and secretary at World Council of Churches headquarters, and meeting with him regularly.[11]

Among the conclusions I have made after my own thirty-five years of ministry are: We learn most of what we need to know as ministers by watching others who know

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how to "do it"—preaching, pastoral care, management, personnel. There are, of course skills to learn from reading books and listening to lectures, but I learned by watching, listening, intentionally apprenticing myself to my mentors who didn't know they were my mentors. This is not news, pedagogically, of course. But what would education for ministry look like if it acknowledged and organized something around this reality? A postgraduate internship? A time of intentional mentoring in collaboration with classroom education?

And: We waste talent and institutional energy and oppress old people by the now-universal assumption that a retired pastor cannot be seen anywhere near his/her old church. The retired pastor must either die or disappear, move far away, sever all ties. So severe is this succession dynamic that we must invest our very best leadership, energy, and resources in a 12- to 18-month process of finding a new leader. Incredible! No other enterprise in the world could or would even think of doing such a thing.

4. A consistent theme in Blake's pastoral ministry is his focus on children and youth. He began by working with young people at St. Nicholas and in each succeeding situation emphasized the importance of Christian education and youth work and participated in it. Former parishioners in Pasadena remembered his between-services visits to elementary classrooms, in Geneva gown and hood, sitting on the floor in a circle of children. Hundreds of high-school students came to his free-wheeling "chats" on Sunday evening in Albany. College students were challenged by his sharp intellect and open mind.

There are signs of a resurgent youth movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We should be doing everything we can think of to encourage and nurture it. Likewise, there is new interest in church-related higher education and campus ministry emerging from our colleges and governing bodies. We have been institutionally ignoring both for thirty years and wondering why we seem to have lost our credibility with young people. Whatever it takes, we need to follow Blake's instinctive priorities and reinvest ourselves in youth work and college/university ministries.

5. Blake managed to keep in creative and faithful tension his sense of call to prophetic ministry and the daily demands of pastoral ministry. In Albany he did it by making five hundred pastoral calls in a year. Later he did it by intentional, visible accessibility. "When you need me, I'll be there for you." In spite of his modest disclaimer, my sense is that his personal warmth and advertised accessibility addressed his people's needs at a deep level.

Prophetic preaching, activity, leading, not backed by pastoral relationship, may feel brave and faithful to the prophet. But Amos didn't have a congregation. Blake knew that and modeled the tension which emerges in an honest, courageous public ministry. If our aspiration is to induce people to change the way they think, the pastor must, in some way, stand where the people are standing and speak for them as well as to them. In an interview with Dr. Brackenridge, Blake remembered an experience as pastor which reveals the way he intentionally maintained the tension in his own life. "In Pasadena when someone, after worship would say 'that was a courageous sermon, pastor,' I would stop and think 'Whose feet am I stepping on today?'"

Eugene Carson Blake led the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the World Council of Churches with energy and imagination and with his whole heart and mind and strength. He was a leader for his time and my conclusion is that his effectiveness rested on his straightforward commitment to Jesus Christ, his trust in the structures and processes of the church as the place to live out that commitment, and his faithful service as a pastor in three congregations.

NOTES

[1]R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Eugene Carson Blake, Prophet With Portfolio* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) viii.

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[2]Ibid., 18.
[3]Ibid., 21.
[4]Ibid., 38.
[5]Ibid., 32.
[6]Ibid., 39.
[7]Ibid., 42.
[8]Ibid., 50.
[9]Ibid., 55.
[10]Ibid., 32.
[11]Ibid., 151.

THE LEGACY OF EUGENE CARSON BLAKE
IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP\
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
BLAKE, THE PASTOR

FEBRUARY 9, 1998
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Last April I was in one of the buildings which flank the street just outside the Plaza of St. Peter, in Rome, on the third floor, in the offices of the Pontifical Secretariat for Christian Unity. My mind and emotions alternating between "What in the world am I doing here?" and "I wish my father and mother could see me now!", and a fairly moving sense of the historicity of the whole experience.

What I was doing there was representing the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which had elected me its Moderator, paying an ecumenical visit to the Vatican. Our party consisted of my wife, Sue, Eugene Turner, from the office of the General Assembly - our chief ecumenical officer, Duncan Hanson, our Coordinator for Mission in Europe, Debbie Vial from our Peacemaking office, and myself. The next day we would be special guests at a Papal audience and did, in fact, bring the greetings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to Pope John Paul II. This day we were guests of the Pontifical Secretariat for Christian Unity and we were invited to exchange ideas with the Director, Cardinal Cassidy, the Vice Director , Monsignor DuPray and the Secretary, Father John Radono, an American.

As we were ushered down the hallway to the conference room past a row of photographs of important ecumenical moments at the Vatican, John Radono pointed to one of the pictures and said "That's one of our favorites." Of course. There he was, Geneva gown and tabs, walking in a procession with Pope Paul VI, flashing that winsome and familiar smile, the Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church, Eugene Carson Blake.

I never met Eugene Carson Blake. In fact I somehow managed to be ordained without really understanding what I had just become part of and didn't know we had a Stated Clerk, or a General Assembly for that matter. But it wasn't long, the time being the early sixties, until I became deeply and proudly aware of my church. And it was Blake that did it. I often reflect on the fact that I was never more in love with my church than I was in the days when Presbyterians were stepping up and assuming leadership in the civil rights movement. It was when I became a Presbyterian truly, by choice and conviction. Although I had been born, baptized, confirmed and now ordained one, I truly became a Presbyterian when my church started to take strong public stands for racial justice. And I was never more proud than I was on the day I saw the newspaper picture of a Presbyterian minister, an official in my church, in clerical collar and straw hat, being arrested at an amusement park outside Baltimore.

My people were not amused. My Republican father was appalled and held me personally accountable. Blake's arrest was a defining moment: it gave me - and others - the opportunity and the responsibility to talk about what it meant to be publicly faithful to Jesus Christ, and

paying the price of faithfulness, and how Presbyterians have always shown up in public when issues of justice and morality were being discussed and confronted.

I thought Blake was God - or at least a very close colleague. If we had a Pope or presiding bishop, he was it for me. I felt the same way about his successors. I was in awe of William P. Thompson, and still am; saw him on an elevator in Philadelphia in 1976 and was so nervous I could barely speak. And as I came to know and appreciate Jim Andrews, I lost a little of the nervousness and began to see how critical this office is for us and to be grateful for the kind of dedication, integrity and leadership offered by Jim, Bill and now Clifton Kirkpatrick.

One of my most cherished memories will be presiding as Moderator over the election of a new Clerk and watching and occasionally being present as Cliff learned the job and claimed it and started to do it in the distinguished manner of his predecessors, but with his own winsomely gentle strength.

Eugene Carson Blake was clearly the right leader at the right time for the Presbyterian Church and although I am not neutral on the subject, part of his preparation and part of the extraordinary gifts he brought to the job came from his extensive experience as a pastor. A friend of mine, Kenneth Smith, President of Chicago Theological Seminary, tells about being invited to leave his pastorate and become a Seminary President. He went to talk to one of his close friends, Hannah Gray, who was the President and Chancellor of the University of Chicago. He told Dr. Gray that he was just a pastor and didn't know how to run a seminary and she said, "Ken, if you can run a congregation, you can run anything."

I've come to a similar conclusion. If you can lead a vigorous, lively and complex church, you can lead anything.

Blake's background prepared him uniquely for pastoral ministry. His biographer, R. Douglas Brackenridge, warns: "Biographers foolish enough to claim that they have unlocked the door of human personality and motivation are, unfortunately, also often foolish enough to believe that what they write down is always correct." [p. viii]

I am indebted to Professor Brackenridge for most of what I learned about Blake, in his fine biography *Prophet With Portfolio*, and also his extensive interview notes which are on file with the Presbyterian Historical Society.

Blake was born in 1906 into an intentionally Christian home. His parents belonged to the West Presbyterian Church, in St. Louis, and their Presbyterianism was pietistic and fundamentalist. Gene Blake was energetic, worked hard at whatever he did - academics and athletics. He was blessed to have two parents who loved him and who imparted, along with their piety and fundamentalism, a gracious openness to other people, particularly their Jewish neighbors.

His parents were people of some means. His father, O.P. Blake, was a steel salesman and did well enough to be a dollar-a-year man for the government during the First World War.

I discovered that Blake had a Chicago connection when his father worked at Inland Steel headquarters in Chicago, 1919-21. His family lived in Winnetka and Blake attended what was and still is one of the best and most creative public secondary schools in the country, New Trier High School.

Blake finished secondary school at Lawrenceville and followed his brother Howard to Princeton University where he played varsity football, starting at guard as a Senior. He worked hard and earned honorable mention on several All East teams in a day when Ivy League football was among the best in the land.

All his life Blake was relentlessly honest about his own abilities and committed to getting the best out of himself. At Princeton he was a good student, graduating *Cum Laude*, but did not earn a Phi Beta Kappa key, which his brother Howard had.

The football experience was hard work as anyone who has ever competed at a varsity level knows. He said of himself: "I've never been an instant success anywhere, but I am competitive and persistent" - in my estimate two qualities more important in the long run than instant success. [p.18]

Princeton broadened Blake and opened up new intellectual and spiritual vistas. He horrified his parents by announcing in 1928 that he was voting for Al Smith. A young Assistant Professor of Philosophy, inspired Blake to study art, art criticism and esthetics. And it was at Princeton that he first encountered a mind and spirit which would play a major role in his later formation, Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a chapel preacher.

Blake was caught up in the early stages of Frank Buchman's Moral Rearmament – became disenchanted and made a major decision - namely that his religious energy would be invested in the church. He said "From then on I decided to be an organization man - that is to work through the regular machinery of the organized church. I recognized the importance of voluntary groups but decided to concentrate on supporting and changing existing ecclesiastical structures." [p.21]

His personal spiritual journey came to a crossroads at a Christian conference at Northfield and he resolved to trust God and not allow intellectual questions - which continued all his life - to interfere with that trust.

After graduating from Princeton he accepted a three year appointment to teach at Forman College in Lahore, India - now Pakistan. He learned about Christian missionary activity - its heroic faithfulness - but also its occasional negative impact, its cultural and ideological captivity and occasional imperialism.

His three year term was cut short by love - as he returned to the United States to marry Valina. Then came a year at New College Edinburgh and a growing sense of call to ministry. It was an interesting time. Princeton was embroiled in the fundamentalist - modernist struggle.

New College taught Blake that warm-hearted evangelicalism could combine with the historical/critical approach to the Bible. His fundamentalism evolved into a kind of conservative orthodoxy - theologically and biblically, with an openness to the world and a commitment to the Gospel's engagement with the culture.

After a year at New College, Blake returned to Princeton, entered seminary, graduated in 1932 - unsatisfied with either liberalism or fundamentalism.

Ordained as an "Evangelist," his first call was at the Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas in Manhattan, one of a consistory of six Reformed Churches, the oldest Protestant Church in America with a continuous existence. The Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas was located at 5th Avenue and 48th in 1628, on the site of what is now Rockefeller Center.

Blake was fortunate to work with a distinguished pastor, Dr. Malcolm James MacLeod, who taught young Blake how to do it... How to preach - besides insisting that Blake write a complete manuscript, MacLeod himself was a good preacher and Blake learned by listening (which, parenthetically, I have concluded is the only way anyone learns to preach).

MacLeod taught him how to be a counselor - a listener - long before anybody was talking about pastoral theology as an academic discipline.

MacLeod put Blake to work with young people - a theme that emerges in each of Blake's pastorates.

And he issued classic advice which Blake appropriated at every step of his career:
"Be able to call on some of the best homes on
Fifth Avenue and also to walk up a five floor tenement and always to conduct yourself as a minister of Jesus Christ."

It was the Great Depression and Blake saw it first hand: people coming to St. Nicholas' for food; shops and stores closing, bread lines, quiet desperation. And he learned the important lesson that poverty is demeaning, complex and dehumanizing. It was a theme that would emerge later. Brackenridge says "Blake realized that the problems of poverty were more complex than hot lunch programs. The experiences of the Great Depression permanently affected Blake and needs of poor people and efforts to overcome poverty would subsequently always be an important part of his professional and personal life."

In 1935 - the young assistant pastor was called to the First Presbyterian Church of Albany - a congregation of 1200 members and again he encountered a distinguished mentor, his predecessor, William Herman Hopkins. Hopkins broke all the rules - at least as we understood them. He sat in the first pew every Sunday as Blake preached. That doesn't often work very well but Blake made it work - visited Hopkins regularly, consulted, asked his advice and the two became good friends. When I read that I reflected on how difficult we seem to have made that situation - with our expectations that our predecessor will either die immediately or go far away,

which for many is a kind of dying, instead of the positive, assertive claiming of the predecessor as advisor, consultant and friend in ministry.

Blake, the pastor, began to emerge distinctly in Albany.

He would later say that he never thought of himself as a good pastor - that he couldn't focus on people's personal problems because he was always thinking of something else. But he made 500 calls his first year in Albany: something I've never done and on Fridays, he and Valina were at home - from 4 to 6 for visitors from the congregation.

He also started to preach prophetically, addressing issues of local and national social and political relevance. This preacher knows from sometimes painful experience that you cannot preach prophetically - and keep your job, unless you are also a pretty good pastor. Preachers who style themselves as contemporary Amoses often forget that Amos didn't have a congregation to tend to and a Session to moderate.

In his first year at Albany, on the Sunday before election day, Blake attacked local political corruption and told his congregation that they were responsible for it by condoning or ignoring it. Some were not happy.

He also ended the old system of pew rentals in opposition to his Board of Trustees who were concerned that there was no other way to raise money to pay the church's bills. Blake listened to their concern and then simply asked every family to donate the exact amount of money they had been charged for their own pew and met with a near unanimous response. I'm sensitive to this issue because Fourth Presbyterian Church, long after every other church discontinued the practice, was still charging pew rent, reserving pews for renters and making visitors wait outside until five minutes before the service in 1960. My predecessor, Elam Davies, ended the practice - contrary to the wishes of the Trustees - with much the same result.

Again, my sense is that prophetic leadership, as well as prophetic preaching, is much more possible and effective - when the one involved is a trusted pastor.

Blake's interest in youth expressed itself again creatively at free wheeling Sunday night "chats" with young people which were unusual at the time and highly popular.

The President of Williams College heard Blake preach and observed his work with young people and invited him to teach a course in Ethics and Theology at the college which Blake did for three years. That experience, too, I believe shaped the pastoral focus of his ministry for the rest of his life.

Also, At Williams, looking for a suitable text to use in a course on Ethics and Theology, Blake became reacquainted with the theologian who he had heard preach at the Princeton University Chapel years before, Reinhold Niebuhr. Blake chose Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, outlined the book paragraph by paragraph for his classroom lectures and in the process became a Niebuhrian.

I did not know that about Blake and I'm glad I now do. It was Niebuhr I assume who gave Blake the deep and defining conviction that the Gospel has - and must always have - political, social, economic relevance.

Blake liked Niebuhr's critique of both liberalism and fundamentalism and his embrace of orthodox Christian doctrine, including the authority of scripture, without embracing fundamentalism.

Once and for all Blake moved away from the conservative, fundamentalist beliefs of his own childhood and youth. He said "I woke one morning and discovered that the front had moved." [p.38]

Niebuhr's brilliant explanation of sin as pride, produced in Blake a balanced sense of his own self in situations and positions which would be increasingly public and therefore susceptible to an inflated sense of self-importance.

Blake wrote: "Reinhold Niebuhr's oft reiterated thesis that a man who is nearest to God is in the greatest danger of the greatest sin, is an almost perfect aid to the preacher who is nearly lost in admiration for his own theology, politics, and sermons. Next to a good sense of humor and prayer, a good dose of Niebuhr is the best thing I know to alleviate a preacher's swollen self-esteem." [p.32]

It was Niebuhr, Brackenridge suggests, who kept Blake from becoming a career chaplain to the wealthy. He came from a comfortable home, attended an elite private school and then Princeton at a time when Princeton was a very different school in terms of economic and racial diversity than it is today. His three churches were large and wealthy and could have nurtured in him an understandable insularity and elitism.

Something like the reverse happened because of Reinhold Niebuhr and the Holy Spirit.

Blake was sensitive to labor issues - again, at a time when that was not an easy position for ministers to assume. He backed up his pulpit pronouncements with visible volunteer work in the community. He paid his dues in terms of Community Chest and Service clubs ... and although his fellow Rotarians or Kiwanians - probably did not agree with his convictions - they respected the devoted pastor and committed citizen and so gave him a hearing.

First Church Albany grew under Blake's leadership and in 1940 he accepted the call of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church - one of the outstanding congregations in the Presbyterian Church. Once again Blake followed a distinguished ministry. Robert Freeman was the Pasadena pastor for 33 years, and once again Blake avoided the professional pitfalls that today cause many to conclude that following a beloved long-term pastor cannot be done and should not be tried by anyone of sound mind.

The Pasadena Church was large - 3,500 members with what at the time was a huge budget - $150,000, wonderful buildings, a radio station and summer camp, a reputation for "progressive orthodoxy" and also some extremely wealthy and extremely conservative members.

At Pasadena, Blake came of age as a preacher, scholar and administrator and began to become more involved in the affairs of the Presbytery of Los Angles which turned to him more and more for leadership. He was on the Judicial commission of the Presbytery which investigated and rebuked a pastor for performing the wedding of Lana Turner and millionaire sportsman, Henry J. Topping, without waiting the prescribed one year after divorce as then required by Presbyterian law.

Pasadena Presbyterian Church began to grow immediately - from 3,500 to 4,500, third largest in the Presbyterian Church with new buildings, programs and an unheard of six ministers on the staff.

And once gain, although he never thought of himself as a pastor, Blake clearly was a great one. Ministers of large congregations have to learn a different way of being pastors and must let go of old, deeply instilled patterns and expectations.

Blake did it by clearly communicating his accessibility and then backing it up by being accessible. He wrote in the parish newsletter:

"I am available to all of you, day or night, in emergency, As a general rule, it is necessary for me to keep my mornings clear for writing sermons, speeches, articles and the like, and for reading. But by appointment, I am always glad to see as many members of the church who want to see me, if for no other reason than that they would like to become acquainted. I, too, want to become acquainted. You do me and the church a disservice if you let it be agreed among you that I am too busy to be seen." [p. 42]

If we ever created a manual on how to be the pastor of a big Presbyterian Church, that paragraph should be in it for all to heed.

Blake called in the hospitals, visited shut-ins, and visited personally with every elder nominee and once again paid attention to young people. I know now how difficult that was: how easy to relegate it to other staff in the name of busyness and priorities. Blake went to the Church's summer camp: played baseball, swam. When some of his young people sewed lace on his swimming trunks, Blake wore them.

He visited the children in the church school regularly and with his staff established a personal relationship of genuine friendship - which created a climate of mutuality and trust in which high expectations can be maintained and honored.

His social concerns began to shape the big Pasadena Church. He started a club for World War II servicemen which grew into a dormitory for 300 every week-end. The Women's Society, a traditional Bible study group, took on responsibility for feeding migrant farm workers and

Blake expanded the horizons of the church's radio station to include classical music, local political issues as well as church programs.

I noted how thoroughly Blake did his homework. His style might not be politically correct in today's environment when leadership often means taking a back seat, keeping your mouth shut and enabling the laity to be responsible. Blake planned every meeting he attended, prepared the agenda, knew what he wanted to see happened, arranged for the members he wanted to be appointed and the officers he wanted to be elected.

And he kept paying attention to his preaching - which continued to address social concerns, increasingly race, and a new ideology which disturbed him deeply, the identification of nationalism - and patriotism - with the gospel - particularly as that ideology was espoused in the zealous anti-communism of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Blake's critique of the over-heated patriotism which came to be known as "McCarthyism" was grounded in sound, biblical reformed preaching. Our ultimate allegiance is to God, not human institutions, particularly governments. He condemned loyalty oaths. Those positions, so important in our tradition often sound suspect if not subversive to the super-patriot of the right - or the left.

When I visited Cuba last year I spoke with Presbyterian pastors and asked if they had encountered government opposition or persecution. One of them - a leader in Cuba - told me he had been detained for questioning recently. "There is a person from the Government/Ministry of Religion in my sanctuary every Sunday," he said, "with a tape recorder to record everything I say. I was brought in for questioning because on Reformation Sunday I said that we Calvinists believe our allegiance is ultimately to our Lord and his Kingdom and not to any human institution, or government. My government wanted to know what I meant by that," he explained.

Blake was criticized when he took on local real estate interests which were offering sub-standard and racially segregated housing - some members walked out during his sermon.

But he was a pastor. He backed his sermon, not only with scripture and tradition but also a common humanity and affection for his people which they knew and felt. Blake did not condemn the sinful perpetrators of injustice and oppression - but swept everyone, including himself, into the picture. What a difference that makes - instead of being singled out for condemnation, to be invited into a community which is considering a mutual problem.

Blake stayed with the Bible - when asked about his sermon preparation he said it's "steel, a flint and a spark. The steel of the word strikes the flint of human need and the spark is the idea that flies."

At the center of his preaching and his pastoral practice was the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He never lost the evangelical focus of his childhood. Christian faith was not merely intellectual assent to certain propositions or creeds, but a personal commitment to and relationship with Jesus Christ. Blake wrote: "The primary task of the church is to bring people to God in Jesus Christ." [p.50]

An interesting encounter with the President of Fuller Seminary, John Ockenga, a Presbyterian pastor from Pittsburgh - which began with Blake opposing Ockenga's laboring within the boundaries of Los Angles Presbytery and the Presbytery refusing to ordain Fuller graduates, ended with Blake and Ockenja meeting together, developing a respectful friendship and not long after Fuller was using the Pasadena Presbyterian Church's sanctuary and classrooms for seminary activities.

Blake played an increasingly important role in denominational affairs in those days - including giving pivotal leadership to the development and publication of the Faith and Life Curriculum - so far as I know - the first and last denominational curriculum to be widely - almost universally - applauded and more importantly, purchased by Presbyterian Churches.

At the age of 45 Blake was at the top of his career as a pastor. He could, of course, have stayed in Pasadena and deepened and broadened his extraordinary ministry. He could have moved to another large congregation. In his years of pastoral ministry he expressed, I believe the highest and best of the Reformed Tradition's model of ministry: a careful scholar, devout student of the Bible, passionate and prophetic preacher and, in spite of the fact that he never thought of himself in this way, a caring and accessible pastor.

He wrote - uncharacteristically reflectively: "I find myself standing a little beyond the middle of life. I stand in the place of the heat of the day when often the defeats of youth and the approaching twilight of age make men lose their sense of direction in life and the feeling of its importance and begin to look for the easy adjustment o the flux of things. Yet I stand where perhaps best of all one can be objective about the great hopes of youth and the weariness of age. Between beginnings and ends, birth and death." [p. 55]

And so when the call came to serve the Presbyterian Church as its Stated Clerk, Eugene Carson Blake answered the call and served the church and led the church through what turned out to be one of the most critical and tumultuous times in its history.

The purview of my assignment could end here - except for the fact that Blake continued to be a pastor in a vastly larger arena - both as Stated Clerk and finally as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches.

In fact, Blake viewed the office of Stated Clerk as a means of expanding his pastoral ministry [p. 60]

He continued to preach prophetically - speaking to and for the denomination.

Preachers know that part of a prophetic ministry is not simply thundering away at the church. Plenty do it. It's not difficult to do. It can make the preacher feel righteous. It rarely does much beyond angering the listeners. Part of being prophetic is finding the words that the church, at its best wants to say: to preach for the church in the world. Blake did it brilliantly.

He also had a reformed sense of the pastor's role to live in and interface with the world for the church. That, too, he did instinctively.

In both the office of the General Assembly and the offices of the World Council of Churches, Eugene Carson Blake exhibited the pastoral instinct which characterized his ministry in the three parishes he served. He paid attention to people - he relied, always on his predecessors, - turning potential rivals and adversaries into friends, colleagues, supporters, and he managed to avoid personally insulting his opponents even in the midst of deep disagreement and strenuous debate.

In conclusion, I should like to advance the following gleanings from Blake's pastoral ministry; areas where he contributed substantially to the life of our church and our role as ministers and servants, as topics for further exploration and discussion.

1. His commitment to the Presbyterian Church as the means to express his faith in Jesus Christ and sense of call to ministry.

During his days at Princeton University Blake became involved in a very popular student movement conceived by Frank Buchman which would become Moral Rearmament. The First Century Christian Fellowship organized "house parties," small groups for Bible study, confession and testimony, and mutual encouragement and seeking "guidance" from the Holy spirit. Blake liked the non-sectarian, non-denominational approach of the organization and participated regularly in house parties. His disenchantment began when it seemed Frank Buchman's opinions and goals regularly coincided with the Holy Spirit's guidance.

That disenchantment of course, is related to one of the great strengths of our Church: its suspicion of unchecked political power and its reliance on the community, the governing bodies of the church, to be a balance to individual power and authority, and the most appropriate arena to make faithful decisions.

And so Blake became a self-styled "organization man, working in and through the church."

Blake's investment of his life in the Presbyterian Church, as a pastor, is worth considering. In a time characterized by what someone recently called institutionalized anti-institutionalism, and when the demise of the denomination as we know it is simply and easily assumed in many quarters, and when the quality, character, not to mention the length, of our meetings is routinely lamented by many who refuse to be accountably involved in the life of the body, Blake's witness is clear. If this thing goes down it may well be the Holy Spirit working in us to create a new church for a new day. It may also be that we adopted the anti-institutionalized individualism of the late 20th Century, gave up on the old one and decided to stay home.

2. Blake's ministry began and proceeded through a time of enormous social and cultural change.

Shortly after his ordination in 1932 a retired minister said to him "I'm glad it's you who is beginning your ministry. things are changing so much I couldn't face being a pastor now." Blake lived through the Great Depression, World War II, post-war economic and demographic change, McCarthyism, Korea, Civil Rights and Vietnam.

We live in a time characterized by the most rapid social and cultural change in the history of humankind Ten year old global maps are hopelessly out-of-date. The Soviet Union is gone. Russian troops serve under American commanders in Bosnia. The Pope is in Cuba celebrating mass and Fidel Castro was in the congregation. Twenty-five percent of the words we routinely use did not exist twenty-five years ago. A "crack salesman" used to very effective sales representative for IBM. Futurist Leonard Sweet calls it a "Phase Transition," a major shifting of the cultural tectonic plates with a greater potential impact than the invention of the printing press and moveable type.

The question, of course, is how to be a faithful Church of Jesus Christ in the brand new world we are facing. And how to induce our lively tradition to respond creatively to the new world without losing its integrity.

Blake was clear that his faith centered in his trust in Jesus Christ and his commitment to the basic mission of the church as bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and bringing people to God in Christ. And then he trusted the church, his own Presbyterian Church, as the best vehicle for his vocation in all the changes ahead.

We simply must learn to be more reflexive, responsive in a world that is changing so rapidly that we risk becoming an anachronism is our own life time. And we must do it without abandoning the faith and the theological tradition that has been handed to us by the generations before us - starting with Blake's.

Parenthetically - can you imagine the energy, renewal and growth that would occur if the Roman Catholic church decided to respond faithfully to what has happened to this role and identity and very being of women in our time?

Unfortunately we don't have to waste time critiquing the Romans. My sense is that if we don't do something quick and radical and dramatic about the urban church - we, you and I will be known as the Presbyterian Amish of our time - so committed to doing it the same way as we always did - that we become a small, precious but very significantly marginal ecclesiastical entity in the future. Forget future - we're 75% of the way there in Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Blake seized Civil Rights, poverty as the realities to which the church needed to respond a generation ago. Not surprisingly Reinhold Niebuhr said that it was Civil Rights that saved the Protestant churches from irrelevance.

The crisis of our day is the slow relentless death of the urban churches. *Presbyterians Today* documented it in the last issue:

	Presbyterian Churches		Presbyterian Members	
Cities	1967	1997	1967	1997
Chicago	143	118	87,882	43,315
Cleveland	72	56	49,064	17,886
Detroit	101	91	81,891	42,017
New York	116	107	41,785	19,142
Philadelphia	182	152	103,953	47,332
San Francisco/ Oakland	35	20	13,243	4,177

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the haunting experience of visiting the sites of early Christian churches in Turkey, observing that Christianity was once a vital force with many thriving churches. Today all that is left in ruins. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. The same thing is happening before our very eyes in our cities.

Why? There are a lot of people who think they know and we have lots and lots of data on racial, economic and demographic change in the cities. We have interesting and lively experiences in urban ministry. What we don't know much about, I would submit, is how to create urban congregations that thrive and grow.

Please understand - we know about how to be a big, urban cathedral. We may know more about that than anyone else, by the way. And we know how to be suburban and county seat. We're learning, I think, how to be rural. But I don't think we know how to be urban.

We have, first of all, lots of old buildings, badly in need of repair, built for a world that doesn't exist any longer. And in those buildings we have aging congregations declining in numbers for very understandable reasons.

And we have a system that finds it virtually impossible to help those congregations this side of the inevitable Presbytery Commission to perform last rites and arrange for the funeral and we're not even very good at that.

The fundamental challenge of the current urban church is raising enough money to meet the Presbytery minimum. Who answers the call, obviously, are brand new ministers whose agenda after about a year and a half becomes getting a new call with a little more money and a little less institutional depression.

The fact that newly ordained clergy have an annoying pattern of getting married and having babies guarantees that they won't be around long.

Who else answers the call - Ministers about to retire.

Now, do forgive me. Some of the most heroic, competent and faithful colleagues I know are the exceptions to these rules. But we don't make it easy.

I don't have the answer - but like Blake I believe in the Presbyterian Church's ability to discover it.

I wonder if it isn't time to think anew and stretch the tradition.

Is the old Victorian church building what it should look like?

Is the Presbytery minimum salary a helpful dynamic?

Do we need a new order of Presbyterian urban missionaries, trained, disciplined, under vows for five years, who will as William Stringfellow advised, live with the poor and let the Holy Spirit and the people create a new form of church?

Do we need to sell off six dying churches and create one new one with a pastor, educator, community organizer, youth worker, housed in a store front with fiscal know-how to the Mac Arthur Foundation or Fourth Church, or First Church Wheaton and say - for $100,000 per year - you can help to create a new church?

Do we need to ask Bill Hybels, God forbid, to a conversation, not on church music, but on responding to new realities instead of slowly but surely dying?

3. Blake learned what he needed to know as a pastor in three churches that challenged him to grow, and in each case part of his growth came as a result of an intentional relationship with a strong predecessor. In fact, that pattern repeated itself when Blake succeeded W. A. Visser't Hooft, an accomplished linguist and distinguished scholar who had helped to found the World Council of Churches in 1948. Blake avoided the twin mistakes of trying to emulate his predecessor or contradicting him, by seeking Visser't-Hooft's advice and counsel, giving him an office and secretary at World Council of Churches headquarters and meeting with him regularly. [p.151]

Among the conclusions I have made after my own 35 years ministry is:

- We learn most of what we need to know as ministers by watching others who know how to do it" preaching, pastoral care, management, personnel. There are, of course, skills to learn from reading books and listening to lectures, but I learned by watching, listening, intentionally apprenticing myself to my mentors who didn't know they were my mentors. This is not news, pedagogically, of course. But what would education for ministry look like if it acknowledged and organized something around this reality? A post graduate internship? A time of intentional mentoring in collaboration with classroom education?

- We waste talent, institutional energy and oppress old people by the now universal assumption that a retired pastor cannot be seen anywhere near his/her old church, must either die or disappear, move far away, sever all ties - and - that so severe is this succession dynamic that we must invest our very best leadership, energy and resources in a 12 to 18 month process of finding a new leader. Incredible! No other enterprise in the world could or would even think of doing such a thing.

4. A consistent theme in Blake's pastoral ministry is his focus on children and youth.

He began by working with young people at St. Nicholas and in each succeeding situation emphasized the importance of Christian Education and Youth Work and participated in it. Former parishioners in Pasadena remembered his between-services visits to elementary classrooms, Geneva gown and hood, sitting on the floor in a circle of children. Hundreds of high-school students came to his free-wheeling "chats" on Sunday evening in Albany. College students were challenged by his sharp intellect and open mind.

There are signs a resurgent youth movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We should being doing everything we can think of to encourage and nurture it. Likewise, there is new interest in church related higher education and campus ministry emerging from our colleges and governing bodies. We have been institutionally ignoring both for thirty years and wondering why we seem to have lost our credibility with young people. Whatever it takes, we need to follow Blake's instinctive priorities and reinvest ourselves in youth work and college/university ministries.

5. Blake managed to keep in creative and faithful tension his sense of call to prophetic ministry and the daily demands of pastoral ministry. In Albany he did it by making 500 pastoral calls in a year. Later he did it by intentional, visible accessibility - "when you need me, I'll be there for you."

In spite of his modest disclaimer my sense is that his personal warmth and advertised accessibility addressed his people's needs at a deep level.

Prophetic preaching, activity, leading, not backed by pastoral relationship may feel brave and faithful to the prophet. But Amos didn't have a congregation. Blake knew that and modeled the tension which emerges in an honest, courageous public ministry. If our aspiration is to induce people to change the way they think, the pastor must, in some way, stand where the people are standing and speak for them as well as to them.

In an interview with Professor Brackenridge, Blake remembered an experience as pastor which reveals the way he intentionally maintained the tension in his own life. "In Pasadena when someone, after worship would say 'that was a courageous sermon, pastor,' I would stop and think 'Whose feet am I stepping on today.'"

Eugene Carson Blake led the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the World Council of Churches with energy and imagination and with his whole heart and mind and strength. He was a leader for his time and my conclusion is that his effectiveness rested on

- his straightforward commitment to Jesus Christ.
- his trust in the structures and processes of the church as the place to live out that commitment.
- his faithful service as a pastor in three congregations.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 26, 1998

TO: John Wilkinson

FROM: John Buchanan JB

John,

Several concerns that I want to put in front of you:

1. As you may know, I'm working with the World and National Council of Churches on the Eugene Carson Blake Ecumenical Endowment Program. The purpose is to raise a little money to endow scholarships for third world theological students to come to the World Council of Churches and also the National Council of Churches for a year of study and intern work. I'm making a presentation at the initial conference at Princeton next weekend. It would be a nice gesture if Fourth Church could be one of the participating ecumenical parishes to make a donation to this program. I am also helping to create a program that will make appeals to large membership churches to become ecumenical parishes and to donate $3,000 either yearly or over a number of years to this program.

2. Do we have any conversation going about Fourth Church making a contribution to the Hawkins-Buchanan Fund for Racial Justice? It doesn't need to be hefty, but it would be a nice gesture if my congregation stepped up to the plate on this.

Perhaps you and I and Kirby could talk about making a presentation to the Session/Joint Finance Committee about using some of the year-end surplus for these two causes.

JMB

JMB:cea

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